

Pointless?

As Africa's rhino poaching crisis deepens, the race is on to stem the trade in rhino horn, stop the slaughter and save these iconic animals from extinction once again. Words and pictures by **Steve and Ann Toon**

a moonlit night in the bush. What could be more appealing? Yet for those in the frontline of Africa's war against rhino poaching it's a nightmare. Everyone is hyper-nervous on nights like these and beefed-up security patrols are on high alert. Moonlight makes the poachers' gruesome task much easier. When the moon is bright Africa's rhinos, daily under attack, suffer even bigger hits.

The moon was bright when two of Kenya's rhinos were lost in separate incidents in just one week this spring. The first animal killed was a white rhino on the Lewa Conservancy in Isolio. She was pregnant. The second was a mature black rhino bull, about 12 years of age. It happened on Solio ranch in Laikipia. In both cases the horns were taken.

It's not hard to see why poachers risk everything in this bloody war for wildlife parts. More valuable than ►

White rhinos: with horn now worth more than its weight in gold, in cash terms, rhinos are more valuable dead than alive





gold, rhino horn can fetch more than \$50,000 per kilo. It's this, together with Asia's rising demand for horn, that's fuelling the illegal trade, sparking one of the biggest surges in poaching the African continent has seen.

Growing affluence in emerging Asian economies, particularly China and Vietnam, has revived this race for rhino horn. Rhino horn, made of keratin and similar to human hair and fingernails, is believed to cure a range of diseases from mild maladies through to cancer. Dr Richard Emslie, scientific officer for the IUCN Species Survival Commission's African Rhino Specialist Group, explains that western clinical trials on rhino horn have indeed shown a slight fever-reducing effect akin to taking mild aspirin. But he suggests these properties may have been exaggerated and points out that there are valid clinical substitutes in traditional Chinese medicine for rhino horn, such as herbs and water buffalo horn.

"What's worrying are new suggested uses for horn, such as the bogus claim that seems to have started

from rumours in Vietnam that rhino horn can cure cancer," he says.

Whichever way you look at it, it's a frighteningly high price to pay to relieve a headache when the future of Africa's rhino species and its wildlife tourist trade could be at stake. In 2007 Kenya lost only one rhino to poachers, but by 2009 22 of the country's rhinos had been poached. In 2011 it was up to 25 rhinos. By April this year seven rhinos had already been lost.

In South Africa, home to 90 per cent of Africa's rhinos, the losses have been even greater. The slaughter reached an all-time high there last year (2011) when 448 rhinos were killed.

It's got worse. On April 16 this year, South Africa's Department for Environmental Affairs put out a statement saying that 171 rhinos had been killed for their horn since the start of the year. That's a rhino killed every 15 hours. Scroll back to 2007 and only 13 rhinos were lost to poaching.

The escalation of the current crisis has been astonishing. Valuable work to build up rhino numbers after the last poaching crisis in Kenya is being eroded. There are now concerns that Africa's rhino populations won't be able to survive a continuing onslaught like this.

"This is a huge blow for a slow-reproducing species," says Benson Okita-Ouma, Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) senior scientist for rhino conservation. "Our national population growth target for rhinos has been five per cent, but we are recording less than a three per cent annual growth rate since poaching escalated in 2009. The proportion of animals taken is more than two per cent each year," he says.

"The greatest concern is that we will soon run short of safe space for the expansion of our rhino population and we will face a situation where population growth is hampered not only by poaching but by density-related issues which would be a double whammy. It's getting very expensive to protect rhinos, both financially and in terms of the human loss as a result of engaging with armed poachers."

Black rhino: populations of this critically endangered species can't survive a continued hit from poachers



RHINO SANCTUARIES

In the early 1990s the Kenyan wildlife authorities adopted a strict policy of rhino protection to counter the drastic effect of poaching, which had seen rhino numbers in the country plummet from around 20,000 in 1970 to just 280 in the 1980s. Remaining individuals were too few and too thinly dispersed to encourage viable population growth, so private land owners, working closely with the KWS, became involved, helping create heavily-guarded sanctuaries to grow rhino populations. A good number of these sanctuaries are in Laikipia, which is now home to just under 50 per cent of Kenya's critically endangered black rhino population and some 70 per cent of its white rhinos.

Richard Vigne is chief executive of Ol Pejeta Conservancy - East Africa's largest black rhino sanctuary. To combat the increased threat of poaching they've had to increase their annual spend on security by as much as \$300,000, employing better trained and better equipped security personnel. "Their work is being backed up by the use of sophisticated technology, and we are lucky to have the firm support of the Kenya Government with a good number of our security personnel now upgraded to police reservists," he says.

"The whole world needs to be made aware of this crisis," he stresses. Along with many leading rhino conservationists, he's concerned that the spiralling cost of battling the poachers is discouraging private land owners, who have been key players in building rhino populations back up in recent years, from staying involved in rhino protection.

"One private landowner has already requested the relocation of his black rhino population, given the massive extra costs now being incurred to stop poaching, as well as the threats he's faced from poaching syndicates," he points out.

The high cost of security is also of prime concern for state bodies involved in rhino protection. Jabulani Ngubane, Rhino Security Co-ordinator for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal, says it's hard to keep pace with poachers. "Our biggest concern is the sophistication of the poaching syndicates and the amounts of money involved in rhino poaching," he says. "We have to spend a few per cent more than they do if we want to stay ahead of them, at a time when resources are scarce."

"Donor funding is needed for increased security for both state and community-owned rhino populations," says Cathy Dean, Director of leading wildlife charity Save the Rhino International. "More than that, we need government support in rhino range countries to prosecute court cases effectively and to upgrade wildlife crime legislation so rhino poaching carries much stiffer sentences. Wildlife crime is second or third only to

Rhino Horn CSI

It may sound like the stuff of popular TV crime fiction, but these days DNA profiling is playing a key role in tracking down and helping nail the bad guys involved in rhino poaching. Ground-breaking scientific techniques are enabling those trusted with the protection and security of rhinos to get the forensic evidence they need for criminal convictions and tougher sentences. The work, part of a project by the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory at South Africa's Pretoria University, aims to collect DNA from rhinos all over the country. This rhino horn DNA profiling is already being used in Kruger Park on the frontline of South Africa's rhino poaching war, where 103 rhino had been lost by April this year. In response, the reserve's anti-poaching units have been issued with special DNA kits and these have already been used in the investigation of several recent poaching incidents.



RHINO HORN CAN FETCH MORE THAN \$50,000 PER KILO

448 RHINOS KILLED IN SOUTH AFRICA LAST YEAR

01 RHINO KILLED EVERY 15 HOURS IN SOUTH AFRICA

drugs and gun-running. It's time governments took it seriously," she adds.

THE FIGHTBACK

Earlier this year, leading conservationists from across Africa met in Nairobi in a bid to develop a comprehensive response to the spiralling problem. A four-pronged strategy was devised, with emphasis on tightening security and law enforcement and raising public awareness in key areas about the impact of the wildlife trade. But the fightback is not going to be easy. Rhino poaching is big business involving highly-organised crime syndicates. Poachers have access to sophisticated resources, from night-vision goggles to helicopters. In the hands of the poachers the same veterinary medicines which conservationists use to tranquilise rhinos for surgical interventions, translocations and so on are being used to sedate rhinos so that their horns can be easily removed. In the wrong hands these drugs are deadly.

Encouragingly, conservationists are now able to punch with more weight. Highly trained tracker dogs, pioneering DNA barcode technology that can identify individual rhino horns and trace seized horn from poachers back to particular poaching cases, along with state-of-the-art US military surveillance equipment are just some of the weapons being added to the anti-poaching armoury.

CONSERVATION RHINOS

In Kenya, plans to introduce mandatory vetting of rhino monitoring staff and stiffer penalties for poaching are underway. Most rhino scouts on private reserves and ranches in the country have now been made into police reservists, allowed to carry automatic weapons and arrest suspects within and outside the conservation areas.

In South Africa the rules for controversial rhino trophy hunting, a loophole exploited in the trafficking of illegal horn, have just been tightened up. In addition to a ban on hunting black rhino and stricter controls on granting licences, in future all rhinos and their horns will have to be micro-chipped before they're moved or sold. Samples of horn and blood for DNA profiling must be taken from all darted rhinos and all horn larger than 5cm has to be marked with a serial number and date.

Greater emphasis is also being placed on efforts to educate people in the 'consumer states' about the problems caused by rhino poaching and the illegal horn trade. "We're keen to start building relationships with NGOs working in China and Vietnam to raise awareness of these problems. Anecdotal evidence suggests many people in those countries simply don't know rhinos and elephants are being killed in order to get their horn or ivory. Perhaps they'd be as shocked as we are if they only knew the facts," Cathy Dean suggests.

Against this backdrop of heightened activity, murmurs about legalising the trade in rhino horn are growing louder. This spring Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife came out in favour of the move. "We're saying there's no silver bullet to end the poaching and so we're in favour of any strategy geared to curb it, including a controlled, legalised trade in horns," says Jabulani Ngubane. "A legal supply of rhino horn will remove the necessity for the killing, reduce poaching by cutting the price of rhino horn on the black market and eventually reduce incentives for the poachers."

Richard Vigne of Ol Pejeta urges caution. He believes conservationists must carefully consolidate their thinking on this before going ahead. "What would we be trying to achieve by legalising the trade? On the face of it harvesting horn from live animals to supply a legitimate market looks sensible as a way to earn money for conservation, incentivise people to keep rhinos and decriminalise the current illicit trade in horn. But there are many unanswered questions. Legitimising the trade could increase demand beyond our ability to supply and prices could be driven up resulting in more – not less – poaching," he suggests.

KWS meanwhile has reaffirmed its stance against freeing up the horn trade "Allowing trade in rhino horn will result in increased poaching where rhino numbers are already in decline," Paul Mgubua, Assistant Director



Rhino Summit 2012 THE FOUR POINT PLAN

Leading players in rhino conservation from across Africa met earlier this year in Nairobi to discuss ways to combat the poaching crisis. Participants agreed an approach that would broadly target the problem over four key areas:

1 New strategies, tools and resources for rhino surveillance and anti-poaching units on the ground, including more advanced communication technology and additional vehicles, possibly including helicopters.

2 Strengthening law enforcement and its coordination at both local and national level, including harsher penalties and fines, improved detection and monitoring and tougher law enforcement.

3 Using public awareness campaigns on wildlife trade issues in both consumer and source states to curb rhino horn demand and the illegal horn trade.

4 Reaching out to influence policy makers, financiers, and government officials at the highest appropriate levels.

Going, going, gone?
The fight to save
Africa's rhinos is
being stepped up

**NO
EVIDENCE
THAT
RHINO
HORN
CAN CURE
CANCER**

of Conservation and Education for the Kenya Wildlife Service told *msafiri*.

It's a complex debate that looks set to divide the conservation community in the months ahead. But, as darkness falls and field rangers once more listen nervously for the whirr of helicopters signalling possible attacks on rhinos from the air, one thing seems clear. The killing must stop. "What right have we simply to allow the extinction of rhinos in Kenya? If we hold this planet in trust for our children is it not our role to look after its natural environment as best we can?" says Richard Vigne. "Imagine the impact on our tourism industry if Kenya became a country where rhinos became extinct." &

Help Save African Rhinos

- Save the Rhino International (www.savetherhino.org)
- International Rhino Foundation (www.rhinos-irf.org)
- World Wide Fund for Nature (www.panda.org)